

T H E L O N G E S T P O E M I N
T H E E N G L I S H L A N G U A G E



J A M E S L O N G E N B A C H

In the London drawing room of Lady Cunard, on a Sunday afternoon in April 1916, a handful of invited guests gathered for the premiere of *At the Hawk's Well*, a new play by W. B. Yeats. There was no scenery, no stage. The musicians' faces were made to appear sunburned, as if they'd wandered into the room after a long journey. The actors wore masks. A square of blue cloth lay on the carpet, suggesting the well to which the play's title refers but also refusing to be anything but cloth: it existed side by side with the French novels arranged on Lady Cunard's Louis XV coffee table.

At the Hawk's Well was the first of Yeats's plays for dancers, plays modeled on the Japanese Noh plays adapted into English by Yeats's friend Ezra Pound. Neither poet knew much about the traditions of Japanese theater, and neither did Michio Ito, the play's dancer, who modeled his movements on Nijinsky's. Yeats imagined that the original audience of the Noh plays would have appreciated the poems of Mallarmé, and his own play was organized more like a modern poem than what his audience was equipped to recognize as a play. For rather than dramatizing the inner world of its characters, the opaque language of *At the*

Hawk's Well provokes an unexpected ecstasy in an unpropitious place.

That place was not an elegant drawing room; that place was the mind.

Night falls;
 The mountain-side grows dark;
 The withered leaves of the hazel
 Half choke the dry bed of the well;
 The guardian of the well is sitting
 Upon the old grey stone at its side,
 Worn out from raking its dry bed,
 Worn out from gathering up the leaves.
 Her heavy eyes
 Know nothing, or but look upon stone.

Spoken by a musician at the beginning of the play, these rhythmically delicate lines are bound together by an image that initially bears little significance: the leaves are leaves – they fall into the well, they are raked, gathered, blown by the wind, heaped up; they rustle, they diminish. But as the image is repeated throughout the play, it becomes increasingly ominous, drenched with significance. The play's language accumulates coherence, but it never stops feeling disorientingly strange. "I but see / A hollow among stones half-full of leaves," says the Young Man, but Yeats's audience could see only a coffee table and a square of blue cloth.

Two days after its premiere, *At the Hawk's Well* was played for charity in front of a larger audience, including Queen Alexandra, Princess Victoria, and the Duchess of Marlborough. The premiere had also been played for charity, but of a different kind, for seated around the square of blue cloth were other artists – people who craved the experience of being alienated from themselves by something new and strange. Pound brought along his new friend T. S. Eliot, who found himself transformed. Having entered the drawing room as the author of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," he emerged as the poet capable of writing *The Waste Land*, the poem Pound would call the longest in the English language. Today, a century after Eliot attended that production of Yeats's play, no poem of the twentieth century has remained simultaneously so influential and so inimitable.

What did a short poem sound like to Eliot?

Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
 Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
 But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
 Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought
 in upon a platter,
 I am no prophet – and here’s no great matter;
 I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
 And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and
 snicker,
 And in short, I was afraid.

The immediate impression here is of a voice speaking. As has long been apparent, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” stands on the shoulders of the great Victorian dramatic monologues such as Tennyson’s “Ulysses” and Browning’s “My Last Duchess.” But the formal integrity of Eliot’s poem does not depend on the consistent illusion of a consistent dramatic voice; in fact, his poem strategically disrupts the illusion.

Imagine the poem more as a concatenation of tones than as a unified utterance. What we hear in the lines just quoted is a tension between two tones, one sincerely terrified by mortality (“I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat”) and the other unable to take such terror seriously, or to be heard doing so: “and snicker.” The rhyme between “flicker” and “snicker” makes the second tone sound initially more prominent (and suggests why Eliot would sound more calculating in the rhymed quatrain poems). But if one deletes the qualifications and asides (“and snicker,” “grown slightly bald,” “after tea and cakes and ices”), the first tone is revealed to be grippingly earnest.

Should I
 Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
 But though I have wept and fasted,
 Though I have seen my head brought in upon a platter,
 I am no prophet;
 I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
 And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat,
 And I was afraid.

This sounds like certain passages of *The Waste Land*, such as the scene in the hyacinth garden in “The Burial of the Dead,” where emotional desperation is not infected with self-consciousness or frivolity: “I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing.” But alluring as the strategically trimmed passage from “Prufrock” might sound, it is single-minded in a way that the poem cannot sustain. For “Prufrock” not only disrupts the illusion of voice; that disruption itself constitutes the poem’s structural integrity.

The poem begins with the familiar sound of Tennysonian languor –

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky

– which is immediately disrupted by what John Berryman called, with instructive hyperbole, the beginning of modern poetry.

Like a patient etherized upon a table.

What thrills here is not the unsentimental image of the etherized patient as such but the disjunction between the sonorous vowels (*go – you – I – out – sky*) and the prickly stutter of consonants that deliver the image. Immediately the poem establishes two tones, two colliding soundscapes, and while the fourth line begins by reestablishing the first tone (“Let us go”) it quickly segues to the second (“through certain half-deserted streets”).

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .
Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”
Let us go and make our visit.

A third tone has erupted – the tone of emotional desperation that becomes increasingly audible as the poem moves forward: “an overwhelming question.” But in these opening lines that tone is all but smothered by the increasingly microscopic exchange between

the sonorous (“Let us go”) and the meticulous (“a tedious argument / of insidious intent”). And when the poem suddenly leaps to a couplet distinguished by egregiously elongated vowels –

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo

– we don’t feel that we’ve been returned comfortably to the tone with which the poem began, even though the two couplets occupy the same tonal register. Instead, we feel that the tonal consistency is oddly in service of narrative discontinuity, making the consistency feel spookily off the mark. Who are the women? Where is the room? The next line expels us from a location we weren’t adequately able to inhabit: “The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes.”

Rather than feeling that “Prufrock” is spoken by a consistent voice, an utterance for which we postulate a human origin, we get the sense that the possibility of coherence has been dismantled: as the poem moves forward, we hear an increasingly unstable concatenation of tones, a concatenation that won’t allow us to construct a secure impression of a singular human subject. Even to say that the poem takes place in the mind, rather than the mouth, seems inadequate. Language rather than subjectivity seems to be in charge. The poem’s sonic trajectory is radically linear, and even when the poem folds back on itself, it seems to be exploding rather than confirming its parameters. To hear this couplet again, as we do – “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” – is to feel lost by virtue of having come home: familiar language is repeated for mysterious purposes. To read “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is to experience this disorientation increasingly as pleasure – to feel that what first might sound like a destructive impulse is in fact the structural principle that generates the poem.

“The self,” wrote Eliot in his Ph.D. dissertation on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley, “seems to depend upon a world which in turn depends upon it; and nowhere, I repeat, can we find anything original or ultimate. . . . The self is a construction.” The unfolding utterance of “Prufrock” embodies this contention, for there seems to be neither a stable self nor a stable world to which the utterance points or on which the utterance rests. Instead, the self suggested

by the utterance is in process, recognizing itself as it recognizes the world. “The soul,” Eliot continued, “is so far from being a monad that we have not only to interpret other souls to ourself but to interpret ourself to ourself.” Eliot’s contention is not that human beings do not possess souls or that the self is an illusion; his point is that these notions of individuality are unavoidably useful but also endlessly compromised. The compromises might be problematic if we posited a state of perfect coherence from which we have fallen, but the rich linguistic texture of “Prufrock” suggests that human experience inheres in the daily project of reestablishing ourselves. To speak is simultaneously to construct oneself and to be shattered.

This is why a description of “Prufrock” as a dramatic monologue continues to feel tempting even after we’ve been attentive to the poem’s tonal extravagance: it’s impossible to dispel completely the illusion of a unified speaking subject, and the poem courts the illusion it also dismantles. By the same logic, this is why Eliot ultimately had to cut these extraordinary lines from the poem — lines that read like a proleptic response to Wallace Stevens’s “Idea of Order at Key West,” in which the overheard voice of a singer makes a chaotic world cohere.

And when the dawn at length had realized itself
 And turned with a sense of nausea, to see what it had
 stirred:
 The eyes and feet of men —
 I fumbled to the window to experience the world
 And to hear my Madness singing, sitting on the kerbstone
 [A blind old drunken man who sings and mutters,
 With broken boot heels stained in many gutters]
 And as he sang the world began to fall apart . . .

Thematically, this passage epitomizes the poem’s account of the relationship of self and world: outside the self, in a world separate from the self, is a voice that paradoxically constitutes the self, and as the voice speaks, the world shatters. Even as it describes this withering dialectic, however, the passage strongly reinforces the sense of coherent rather than relational self — a self fully equipped to articulate such philosophical complexity. The passage explicates rather than embodying the poem’s dilemma in its linguistic texture, and it consequently makes sense that Eliot would ul-

timately elect to cut the passage, despite (or in a way because of) its power.

Though “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” was completed by 1911, the poem did not appear in *Poetry* magazine until 1915. Almost immediately, Eliot began to fear that “Prufrock” was a swan song. Poems came slowly, and his critical prose represented a sophisticated preoccupation: conceivable answers to conceivable questions. Meanwhile, Eliot was groping for answers to a question he did not yet know how to formulate: how would the creator of “Prufrock,” a poem that simultaneously proffers and dispels the illusion of a human voice, structure a long poem of inevitably greater complexity – a poem that would initially be called “He Do the Police in Different Voices”?

“I am often asked whether there can be a long imagiste or vorticist poem,” said Pound in 1915. The prescriptions that produced imagist poems made no mention of length; shorter poems were not inevitably to be preferred to longer poems. But the most important prescription – “use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation” – inevitably encouraged a poetic discipline that shied away from the discursive presentation of information, shrinking lyric utterance to its pithiest core. When Pound made his earliest versions of Chinese poems, working exclusively from Herbert Giles’s English translations, his imagist procedures transformed this poem –

O fair white silk, fresh from the weaver’s loom,
 Clear as the frost, bright as the winter snow –
 See! friendship fashions out of thee a fan,
 Round as the round moon shines in heaven above,
 At home, abroad, a close companion thou,
 Stirring at every move the grateful gale.
 And yet I fear, ah me! that autumn chills
 Cooling the dying summer’s torrid rage,
 Will see thee laid neglected on the shelf,
 All thoughts of bygone days, like them bygone.

– to an utterance that some ears could not recognize as poetry at all.

O fan of white silk,
 Clear as the frost on the grass-blade,
 You also are laid aside.

Pound's poem, carved from Giles's clunky pentameters, would stand apart even if Giles's poem were well made. Gone is explanation, dramatic context, narrative tissue; what had been spelled out is here strongly implied. Poems like Pound's "Fan Piece, for Her Imperial Lord" appealed to an avant-garde sensibility that had tired of Victorian discursiveness while at the same time confirming a Romantic preference for moments of emotional intensity.

Pound published "Fan Piece" in 1914, and less than a year later he needed publicly to admit that he was chafing against the limitations of imagist brevity. Pound's ambition was to write a long poem, since, like Eliot, he recognized that his stature would ultimately rest on a poem driven by an epic impulse – a poem that would inevitably be seen as a successor to poems as different as *The Prelude*, *In Memoriam*, and *Leaves of Grass*. But his ambition stood at odds with his aesthetic: how could he write a poem of immense length while at the same time preserving the condensed economy of means, the linguistic and emotional intensity, that distinguishes a poem like "Fan Piece, for Her Imperial Lord"?

The Waste Land is the answer to this question. After helping Eliot to discover the poem's final shape, Pound admitted that he was racked by jealousy, for he recognized that Eliot had succeeded where his own attempts at a long poem had faltered. In his first three cantos, published in 1917 and later scuttled when Pound reorganized this very long poem's opening, Pound retreated to the Browningsque discursivity that he had previously abandoned for the shock of imagist condensation. Subsequently, with *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, published in 1920, Pound produced precisely what the author of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" would not: a long poem made, like *In Memoriam* or *Leaves of Grass*, out of a sequence of discrete lyric utterances – another poem that confirmed Edgar Allan Poe's contention in "The Philosophy of Composition" that "what we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones."

This came increasingly to be the case throughout the later nineteenth century. Think not only of Tennyson and Whitman but of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *House of Life* or George Meredith's

Modern Love: the disparate poems of these sequences are unified by a consistent lyric voice. More seductively fragmented in its movement was the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, in which the many pieces of “Song of Myself” were not numbered but simply laid side by side, a procedure that blurs the boundaries of the lyric utterances and makes the movement of the entire poem feel more intricate, less a matter of arranged wholes as interwoven pieces. Still, the indomitable presence of the lyric “I” mitigates this effect, allowing us to process the accumulating pieces of “Song of Myself” without registering the full effect of their disparity.

Listen in contrast to a passage from “The Burial of the Dead,” the first of the five movements of *The Waste Land*.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
 There is shadow under this red rock,
 (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
 And I will show you something different from either
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Frisch weht der wind

Der Heimat zu

Mein Irisch Kind,

Wo weilest du?

“You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;

“They called me the hyacinth girl.”

– Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not

Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither

Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,

Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

Oed’ und leer das Meer.

Madame Sosotris, famous clairvoyante,

Had a bad cold, nevertheless

Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
 With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
 Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
 (Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)

Even more aggressively than “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” this passage moves forward through a strategic arrangement of tones that simultaneously creates and dismantles the possibility of coherence. Eliot begins with twelve lines in a strongly prophetic tone, reminiscent of Ezekiel: “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” But these lines are immediately superseded by four lines in German: their sound is radically at odds with what we have just heard, but if we know their source (a sailor’s melancholy song to his beloved from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*) the lines seem continuous with what follows, the recollection of lost erotic promise in the hyacinth garden. Though very brief, this fragment suggests just enough dramatic context to make it feel like a complete scene. But however explicable this scene might be, the “I” who speaks the passage bears no obvious relationship to the “I” who would show us fear in a handful of dust. Then the “I” shifts again: with the swift introduction of Madame Sosostriis, we move from the heartbroken to the broadly comic, only to find that the tone of this fragment not only contrasts with what we’ve heard so far but is itself interrupted by a different tone, suddenly lyrical and achingly sincere: “Those are pearls that were his eyes” – Ariel’s song to Prince Ferdinand in *The Tempest*. Moving through the passage, we’re negotiating a tangle of precisely discernable but oddly dislocated tones, not a juxtaposition of complete or coherent utterances.

These fragmentary pieces are not much like imagist poems, but they retain the particular value of imagist poems: all immediacy and impact, no background, no explanation, no connective tissue. They lack a strong sense of closure, so our experience of them feels incremental, in process, as if the pieces were woven together rather than juxtaposed, as poems in a sequence would be. And while the five movements of *The Waste Land* are definitively numbered and titled, suggesting that it is a reader’s job to make meaning out of the poem through juxtaposition of these discrete movements, the movements themselves are made up not of firmly

delineated sections but of provocatively incomplete pieces, pieces that feel coherent not because of narrative continuity or dramatic situation but because of a swiftly established certainty of tone.

It's instructive to recall that some of the lines of the passage I've examined were originally the opening lines to a poem called "The Death of St. Narcissus," completed around 1915. Folding this poem into the texture of his long poem, Eliot used only a piece of it, not the whole; the whole would have established a more clearly identifiable speaker and subject matter. At large, *The Waste Land* feels as if it were made of pieces that carry, because of their sharpness of tone, echoing remnants of contexts from which they've been rent. The poem accumulates coherence as we move through its texture not because there is an underlying schema (there isn't one, despite many readers' efforts to put one there), but because the various pieces of the poem create a chamber in which subsequent pieces resonate.

The first reader to encourage a schematic reading was of course Eliot himself, who wrote of James Joyce's *Ulysses* that it employed not a "narrative method" but a "mythical method," involving "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity." Eliot must have suspected that baffled readers would link his remarks about a mythical method with his notes to *The Waste Land*, especially the headnote, in which he pointed eager hermeneutists to James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and to *From Ritual to Romance*, Jessie Weston's book about the Grail legend. Subsequent readers, eager to manage the poem's chaotic energies, tried to elevate the presence of myth, transforming one of the poem's many ingredients, the Grail legend, into a kind of key; the proposed presence of a key turned the poem into a lock. But this manner of reading *The Waste Land* was strategic, not inevitable, for Eliot's manuscripts reveal that the Grail legend played no part in the poem's structural or thematic design. Even the poem's final title (its most potent reference to the myth) was a late addition.

Another misleading remark about the poem's structure, Eliot's note about the function of Tiresias, is slightly more useful. Tiresias appears in the middle of the third movement of *The Waste Land*, "The Fire Sermon," where he tells the story of a mechanical sexual encounter between a typist and a "young man carbuncular." "Tiresias," says Eliot in the note, "although a mere spectator

and not indeed a ‘character,’ is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currents, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem.”

Eliot is groping here: Tiresias is merely a “spectator” and certainly not a “character” but indeed the most important “personage.” In a sense, he’s describing how *The Waste Land* would feel if, like “Prufrock,” it were something akin to a dramatic monologue, a poem structured by a presiding consciousness. And the value of Eliot’s note is that it alerts us to the possibility of a partial coherence (“not wholly distinct”) that may emerge through the process of our reading the poem. But Eliot did not write *The Waste Land* with this centralizing function for Tiresias in mind, and it’s too schematic to say that Tiresias “sees” the poem’s substance, or that the poem’s various utterances literally collapse into his observing presence. The poem’s various instances of first-person speech seem less like fully delineated voices than like disembodied fragments of language: “I will show you fear in a handful of dust” – “You gave me hyacinths first a year ago” – “Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!”

Consider the way in which “He Do the Police in Different Voices” originally began.

First we had a couple of feelers down at Tom’s place,
 There was old Tom, boiled to the eyes, blind,
 (Don’t you remember that time after a dance,
 Top hats and all, we and Silk Hat Harry,
 And old Tom took us behind, brought out a bottle of fizz,
 With old Jane, Tom’s wife; and we got Joe to sing
 “I’m proud of all the Irish blood that’s in me,
 “There’s not a man can say a word agin me”).

These lines needed to be cut for the same reason that the passage about the singing drunk needed to be excised from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: they establish too straightforwardly the sense of a coherent speaking voice. In contrast, the integrity of the remaining monologue-like passages is compromised by a wild disparity in tone: either the speaker seems deranged or the pas-

sage, for all its illusion of spokenness, ceases to imply an individualized speaking presence.

Near the beginning of “The Fire Sermon,” for instance, we hear a voice describing its surroundings with a vividness that initially makes it sound like a character’s voice.

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
 Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
 While I was fishing in the dull canal
 On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
 Musing upon the king my brother’s wreck
 And on the king my father’s death before him.

These lines echo a scene in *The Tempest* in which Ferdinand sits similarly beside a body of water thinking about father’s death. But in *The Waste Land* the dramatic illusion is undermined, for the speaking voice is revealed to consist of borrowed language, as if the source of the speech were not a thinking human subject but language itself.

But at my back from time to time I hear
 The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
 Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.
 O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
 And on her daughter
 They wash their feet in soda water
Et O ces voix d’enfants, chantant dans la coupole!

Disruptive enough is the sudden quotation from Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” (“But at my back I always hear”), but instead of the expected “Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near,” we get “the sound of horns and motors.” It’s no longer necessary or possible to imagine the Prince of Naples uttering the words to a popular ballad (“O the moon shone bright”) and launching into the final line of sonnet by Paul Verlaine. What that line means is interesting (“And O those children’s voices chanting in the dome”), but we need to feel the line as an intrusion, an eruption of inexplicable sound.

Even the poem’s most voice-driven passage, the lines about Lil and Albert at the conclusion of “A Game of Chess,” disintegrates into a similarly lavish effusion.

Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,
 What you get married for if you don't want children?

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Well, that Sunday Albert was home, they had a hot
 gammon,

And they asked me in to dinner, to get the beauty of it hot –

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.

Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.

Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night,
 good night.

Although the barman's announcement of closing time initially comes across as dramatic, a remark spoken by a character, it comes increasingly to feel like an ominously dislocated utterance; with each repetition it becomes increasingly spooky. Then the voice delivering the account of Albert and Lil also becomes unmoored from its dramatic location, segueing into language we can't imagine (and aren't asked to imagine) such a voice employing: the language of Ophelia's mad scene in *Hamlet* – "Sweet ladies, good night, good night." It doesn't seem quite right to say that this passage implies a discrete human consciousness, but neither does it seem right say that it refuses that illusion altogether. Again, we feel that the poem moves forward not so much through the juxtaposition of coherent wholes, discrete voices, as by the interweaving of disembodied, fragmentary tones. The most important differences in this poem of "different voices" occur not between the voices but within them.

April is the cruelest month.

Although the first complete piece of syntax in *The Waste Land* may conceivably be spoken, it is spoken in a completely different register from the eighth line ("Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee / With a shower of rain"). And though this register might feel more consistent with subsequent lines ("he took me out on a sled, / And I was frightened. He said, Marie, / Marie, hold on tight"), we are not tempted to paraphrase the passage this way: Marie, who finds the undemanding season of winter attractive, remembers a sledding incident in her youth.

These fragmentary pieces of utterance, each so distinctive in tone, do ask to be brought into coherence with one another, if only because of their immediate proximity; grammatically, the “I” who is frightened on the sled ought to be one of the “we” who are surprised by the shower of rain. Yet the grammar of the passage feels weirdly at odds with the disjunctive sequence of events, and the best we can hope for (in the language of Eliot’s note about Tiresias) is that these pronouns are not wholly distinct. The passage resists the coherence it also insinuates.

The pleasure of reading *The Waste Land* is the resistance. Is Prince Ferdinand not wholly distinct from the Phoenician sailor? Is Marie not wholly distinct from the young woman in the hyacinth garden? These questions are both pertinent and off-point. For the poem’s various passages are not only strategically different from one another, thwarting any effort to fold them into a continuing lyric utterance; each piece so strongly resists closure that the movement between them is a matter of negotiating disjunctive leaps not between one short poem and another, one discrete movement and another, but between one provocatively clipped fragment and another. As a result, the developing movement of the poem feels simultaneously assured and out of control, a stream whose turns and eddies we cannot predict, though we can follow it plainly, step by step. What does that movement feel like? Why is it satisfying to inhabit it?

Recall now Lady Cunard’s drawing room. When Yeats wrote *At the Hawk’s Well*, he was tired of theater business. He wanted to create an intimate theater that did not require a large audience to pay its bills. He wanted to write plays whose power depended on ritualistic spectacle rather than dramatic illusion. During rehearsals, Yeats asked his masked actors to move as if they were marionettes. He instructed them to declaim their lines coldly, hieratically, rather than interpreting them in a way that made them seem subjective, driven by human will. In one rehearsal, when an actor was late, Pound stepped into the role of the Old Man, and Yeats liked what he heard: he didn’t want his play to be (in the conventional sense) acted at all. “It was her mouth, and yet not she, that cried,” says the Old Man of the Guardian of the Well of Immortality.

Reducing the prominence of character and motivation presented Yeats with a crucial challenge, however, for it denied him the most readily available tools for organizing a dramatic action. Pound's translations of the Noh plays provided new tools. The plays are structured around a central metaphor that, repeated in new contexts over time, creates what Yeats called a "rhythm of metaphor" – a way of organizing a dramatic action while "neglecting character" just as a painter might for expressive purposes neglect the illusion of space. "The withered leaves of the hazel / Half choke the dry bed of the well," says a musician at the beginning of *At the Hawk's Well*, standing beside the square of blue cloth, and the image recurs so often that it creates a web of significance that is both portentous and strangely opaque – as if the play were about the most essential human questions but also about nothing but dead leaves.

Imagine Yeats, Pound, and Eliot discussing this rhythm of metaphor in Lady Cunard's drawing room. For not long after the premiere of *At the Hawk's Well*, Eliot would write about the Noh plays in much the same way, suggesting that they are organized by "a unity of the image" that reminded him of certain cantos of Dante. Pound was also inspired to imagine larger poetic structures. When he admitted that he was often asked if there could be a long imagist or vorticist poem, he turned to the Noh drama for precedent: "Its unity consists in one image, enforced by movement and music. I see nothing against a long vorticist poem."

Yeats would soon produce a poetic sequence organized by the rhythm of metaphor in *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*, a sequence whose starkly disparate poems are conjoined through repetition of the words *dragon*, *weasel*, and *labyrinth*. As Yeats recognized, long narrative poems by Shelley or Tennyson might have employed the rhythm of metaphor as well, but in lieu of narrative these interwoven schemes of repetition provide the connective tissue of the sequence. Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* would operate similarly, its discrete poems referencing one another, and so would *The Waste Land* – but with a crucial difference.

Because *The Waste Land* transgresses the boundaries of the discrete lyric poem, denying its readers the satisfaction of having mastered smaller units on the road toward mastering the whole, Eliot's tissue of repeated words, images, metaphors, and lines be-

comes the single most prominent structuring principle in the poem. And rather than appearing at the outset to be the poem's foundation, this principle accrues its power as the poem progresses – as if the foundation were slowly being constructed beneath a house that has already been partly built. The conclusion of *The Waste Land* is no less fragmented and disorderly than the beginning of the poem, but the elements of its disorder echo language that appeared earlier in the poem, and each new repetition of the language transforms what might have initially seemed like a coincidence into an increasingly load-bearing element of the poem's structure. Coherence is something that happens to us as we read *The Waste Land*. The poem becomes the vessel of itself over time.

For instance, when reading the passage about Madame Sosostriis at the conclusion of the first movement of the poem, “The Burial of the Dead,” we encounter Eliot's first reference to *The Tempest*: the song in which Ariel hints to Prince Ferdinand that his father might not be drowned but magically reborn.

Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)

The line from Ariel's song associates Phlebas, the drowned Phoenician sailor, with Ferdinand's father, but what the association suggests remains mysterious: we experience the line as disruption, one of the many dislocated tones that comprise the poem's fractured opening movement. Then, in the middle of “A Game of Chess,” the second movement of the poem, the line from Ariel's song is repeated.

“What is that noise?”

The wind under the door.

“What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?”

Nothing again nothing.

“Do

“You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

“Nothing?”

I remember

Those are pearls that were his eyes.

Once again, these lines seem driven not simply by human voices but by the larger discursive arena of language itself: the lines echo not only *The Tempest* but *Julius Caesar* (“What noise is that?”), *King Lear* (“Nothing will come of nothing”), and *Othello* (“You have seen nothing then?”). But most important, these lines from *The Waste Land* echo earlier lines in *The Waste Land*, for when we hear the phrase “I remember / Those are pearls that were his eyes,” we feel that we could be uttering it ourselves. We remember the earlier association of Ariel’s song with Phlebas, and though we don’t yet know why it’s important that we do so, we are enticed by the possibility of an increasing coherence, an expanding web of associations both within and without the poem.

Similarly, having heard the phrase “Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn” in “The Burial of the Dead,” we hear the phrase again – but with a difference – in “The Fire Sermon”: “Unreal City / Under the brown fog of a winter noon.” And if we now expect to move from dawn to noon to evening, the third turn on the phrase disrupts our expectations while also gratifying them.

Falling towers
 Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
 Vienna London
 Unreal

Here, the word “Unreal” seems to float up from the unpunctuated list of cities, as if the connection to the earlier “Unreal Cities” were happening at the very moment we’re reading the poem. The language seems unpremeditated, driven by chance, at the same time that it feels structurally significant.

Twit twit twit
 Jug jug jug jug jug jug
 So rudely forc’d.
 Tereu

Here we immediately recognize these lines as an echo of earlier lines about Tereus’s rape of Philomel (“by the barbarous king / So rudely forced”), and though the lines are then followed logically by the sexual encounter between the young man and the typist, they also feel unhinged from the story of Philomel, as if the language were operating purely as sound. “Tereus” becomes the

vocative “Tereu.” The nightingale’s song (“‘Jug jug’ to dirty ears”) becomes a string of syllables akin to “twit twit twit.” The phrase “so rudely forc’d” sounds not only like *The Waste Land* itself but also like Milton’s “Lycidas” – “I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude, / And with forced fingers rude / Shatter your leaves.” Is that association appropriate? Once we begin constructing the web of associations, it’s difficult to tell where it should stop. This is one reason why Pound referred to *The Waste Land* as the longest poem in the English language.

It’s also why our growing sense of the poem’s coherence can be both reassuring and unsettling. Had Eliot retained an earlier version of these lines from “A Game of Chess” –

I remember

The hyacinth garden. Those are pearls that were his eyes,
yes!

– the continuity with the earlier instance of Ariel’s song would be made on the firmer ground of narrative: we would be certain that the “I” speaking these lines was the same “I” that could not speak to his beloved in the hyacinth garden passage of “The Burial of the Dead.” But as he worked with Pound on the manuscript, Eliot cut the suggestion of narrative continuities, leaving us with the dangling possibility that the two speakers might be related – or that there is a gathering formal energy in the poem that acts independent of what sounds like speech.

For while the poem’s subject matter might emphasize scenes of human disconnection (the lovers in the hyacinth garden, Albert and Lil, the typist and the young man carbuncular), the poem’s language is in contrast establishing connections. And as readers participate in the construction of this web of connections, their sense of how the poem’s language works begins to constitute their sense of what the poem’s language might mean: should our experience of these formal continuities be taken, like the reiteration of Ariel’s song about rebirth (“Those are pearls that were his eyes”), as a sign that the poem’s vision is ultimately redemptive?

“This music crept by me upon the waters”

And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.

O City city, I can sometimes hear

Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
 The pleasant whining of a mandoline
 And a clatter and a chatter from within
 Where fishermen lounge at noon: where the walls
 Of Magnus Martyr hold
 Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.

Following immediately on the encounter of the young man and the typist in “The Fire Sermon,” these lines offer a glimpse of social, aesthetic, and spiritual wholeness that has seemed so far unavailable on the thematic level of *The Waste Land*. The unreal city has suddenly become a place where the glories of Renaissance architecture exist harmoniously with the lives of people who were last seen walking over London Bridge with their eyes fixed before their feet. But the passage feels like something more than a passing glimpse, for it is linked not only to the earlier “Unreal City” passages, but to the earlier references to *The Tempest*: “This music crept by me upon the waters” is what Ferdinand says in response to Ariel’s song about magical rebirth. Because we can connect this line to the earlier repetitions of Ariel’s song, the possibility of redemption appears to be bolstered by the possibility of an increasing structural integrity.

Notice that Eliot needs us to work for these connections. We need to recognize the line from *The Tempest*, and its connection to other lines needs to seem like a stage in a faltering, equivocal process, not like a puzzle piece dropping into place. What’s more, the process is under siege. However cumulative the Magnus Martyr passage might feel, it is followed immediately by still another sordid sexual encounter: “On Margate Sands. / I can connect / Nothing with nothing.” And then the door to “The Fire Sermon” slams shut: “O Lord Thou pluckest me out / O Lord Thou pluckest // burning.”

But then something unprecedented happens. We’re delivered from the wildly disparate pieces of “The Fire Sermon,” the longest movement of *The Waste Land*, to “Death by Water,” the shortest movement. The mere 8 lines about the drowned Phoenician sailor – associated with Ferdinand’s apparently drowned father at the beginning of the poem – bear as much structural weight as the 139 lines of “The Fire Sermon.”

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
 Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell
 And the profit and loss.

A current under sea
 Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
 He passed the stages of his age and youth
 Entering the whirlpool.

Gentile or Jew
 O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
 Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

What matters about this lyric is not so much what it means but how it sounds – how it functions within the unfolding structure of the poem at large. Abruptly, after negotiating an intricate tissue of multiple tones through the first three movements of *The Waste Land*, we are given an uninterrupted and coherent lyric. Everything stops. The poem pivots. Prior to this moment, Phlebas the Phoenician has not been a dominating presence, but we suddenly feel the weight of all the poem’s interconnected references to *The Tempest* bearing down on his reappearance: Is Phlebas merely dead, lost forever, or will he be reborn, his eyes transformed into pearls?

Just as Prospero keeps Prince Ferdinand suspended in *The Tempest*, allowing him to hear Ariel’s song but not letting him know that his father is alive, Eliot keeps his readers suspended. When we leap from the cacophony of “The Fire Sermon” to the sudden focus of the Phlebas lyric, we feel that the lyric’s significance is at once thematically tenuous and structurally momentous, just as the reappearance of the words “jug jug” seemed both haphazard and meaningful. And when we leap from Phlebas, floating in the limbo of “Death by Water,” to the suddenly retrospective mood of the opening lines of “What the Thunder Said,” the poem’s final movement –

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
 After the frosty silence in the gardens
 After the agony in stony places

– we feel that something decisive has happened in “Death by Water,” though we’re not sure what it was. Will *The Waste Land*

enact a tragedy, nothing connected with nothing, or will it become a romance like *The Tempest*, in which everything we've lost will magically be restored, the dead brought back to life, the lovers returned to the hyacinth garden for a new start? Will the poem's structure embody the poem's deepest thematic wish, connecting everything with everything?

Eliot discovered that structure in the process of writing *The Waste Land*, and our experience of reading the poem recapitulates the discovery. Our experience is neither one of chaos nor one of wholeness, though it leans closer to wholeness in its procedures than its themes. Our experience inheres in the incremental discovery of the possibility of provisional structures of continuity within our larger and not completely indomitable sense of the poem's disparities. The poem asks us to consider what degree of wholeness we may expect from our poems and our lives. It provokes questions not by dangling answers but by alerting us to the rewards of partial knowledge. It asks us to reimagine what wholeness might feel like.

It asked its author to do the same thing. The earliest version of the Phlebas lyric appeared in "Dans le Restaurant," a poem written in French around 1918. Composing "Death by Water," Eliot placed an English version of the lyric at the conclusion of a lengthy narrative about a shipwreck. And after Pound persuaded him to cut this narrative, Eliot wanted to ditch the Phlebas lyric as well. But Pound was adamant: Phlebas had to stay. At this moment in the poem's development, Pound saw (as Eliot could not) that the poem's expanding web of connections not only justified Phlebas's presence but demanded it.

That Eliot quickly came to agree is suggested by the fact that each of the quartets in *Four Quartets* would mimic the final structure of *The Waste Land*: five moments of multiple parts – except for the fourth movement, which is in every case a pristine lyric poem, an impingement, a turning. But Eliot's equivocation over the Phlebas lyric reminds us that the design of *The Waste Land* was unprecedented, despite the gathering of forces epitomized by the premiere of *At the Hawk's Well* in Lady Cunard's drawing room. *The Waste Land* is not a sequence in which coherent pieces depend on an underlying structure, but a series of fragments that

gradually accrues a structure while also resisting the attendant glamour of conclusiveness. Eliot's equivocation becomes our own.

This is why the astonishingly cacophonous and beautiful final lines feel like a satisfying conclusion while also pushing the poem's strategies of radical condensation to their highest pitch. Any vestigial nostalgia for a unified speaking voice is here obliterated.

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

Poi s'ascese nel foco che gli affina

Quando fiam uti chelidon – O swallow swallow

Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih

The Waste Land does not conclude by folding its disparate pieces into a whole: instead, it offers its most extravagant act of discontinuity, an act into which its readers are initiated through their experience of the poem's unfolding structure. The process of reading the poem is not one simply of progressive unification of disparate materials but of progressive comfort with varying degrees of disparity, disparity that begins to seem not like a falling away from wholeness but like a plenitude in its own right.

This is the point of the parable of the thunder, taken from one of the ancient Hindu Upanishads, on which much of final movement of *The Waste Land* is based. In the parable, the Lord of Creation asks his children (gods, men, and demons) to interpret the word *da*. But while the three groups give different meanings (*data*, *dayadhvam*, *damyata* – “give,” “sympathize,” “control”), the Lord of Creation insists that everyone has understood the word correctly. Similarly, the concluding lines of *The Waste Land* entertain a vision of grace in which difference has not been erased but accommodated. At the beginning of the poem, a prophetic voice tells us that we “know only / A heap of broken images.” At the conclusion, we don't know anything other than that – “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” – but we know it differently. A heap of fragments does not constitute our ruin; it is shored against ruin, keeping us whole.

Why organize a poem this way? In literary historical terms, *The*

Waste Land fulfills a high Romantic dream, a dream that the imagist movement clarified: the large-scale maintenance of the unmitigated linguistic intensity we associate with very short poems. But more profoundly, *The Waste Land* fosters a heightened awareness of the work we do while making sense of any poem, and not only poems but of daily life – the choices we make, the evidence we emphasize, the evidence we ignore. The raw data of experience do not come to us in any orderly fashion, and if we noticed with unswerving attention everything we saw and heard, our lives would seem incoherent. So we make connections selectively, building tentative structures from experience, based on the way we've processed earlier experiences. *The Waste Land* does not so much describe this work as invite its readers to participate in it. And that invitation suggests that psychic, cultural, and spiritual disorder is not for Eliot something so simple as a problem to be solved; it is a process we inhabit, sometimes arduously, occasionally with joy.